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Communication Flow, Channels, Content and Climate in Downsizing

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ABSTRACT

Effective internal communication contributes to the overall organizational communication that aims to maintain a sustainable reputation during times of change. Arising from this belief, this paper aims to develop a theoretical framework in which the type of communication content, flows, channels, and climate better fits into the planning, implementation, and revitalization phases within the downsizing process. To this end, a literature review on downsizing studies has been conducted, resulting in examples of the types of communication content, flow, channels, and climate that should characterize internal communication before, during, and after the downsizing process. These examples will be provided together with the communication objectives relevant for effective internal communication during downsizing.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational downsizing is a set of intentional activities performed by organizations that involve the reduction of personnel and the improvement of efficiency in a firm to control costs and maintain competitiveness in the market (Cameron 1994). Previous studies show that over 50 percent of the 1,468 firms that had downsized reported that productivity had declined as a result of the downsizing (Cameron 1994, Cascio 1993). Much evidence suggests that downsizing leads to a drop in productivity (Mabert and Schmenner 1997 cited in Appelbaum et al. 1999a), has a negative impact on employees' satisfaction and commitment (Luthans and Sommer 1999), and results in strong negative effects on the so-called "survivors" (Sadri 1996, cited in Appelbaum et al. 1999a, Orpen 1997, DiFonzo and Bordia 1998, Baron and Kreps 1999, Appelbaum et al., 1999a).

Current literature discusses two main reasons for such failures (Orpen 1997). First, the idea of restructuring may simply be the wrong response to the problem encountered by the company. Second, when restructuring is the right response, it seems that many firms cannot resist the temptation to restructure too much too fast. In particular, some authors emphasize that companies have been ineffective in their downsizing efforts because the change that failed was communicated poorly (Burlew et al. 2000 cited in DiFonzo and Bordia 1994) and because of the poor communication (Appelbaum and Magda 2000). Indeed, feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, and anxiety among employees (Mishra et al. 1998; DiFonzo and Bordia 1998) might be lowered by internal communication that facilitates the management of change (Young and Post 1993). As Freeman (1999) states, the advantages in communicating during the downsizing process are reducing the incidence of rumors and providing meaning and reframing for the organization's members in the midst of change. This importance that authors give to internal communication during the downsizing process is explained by the fact that the organization's perceived care for its employees is a key factor in developing a strong and durable reputation (Fombrun and van Riel 2004); internal communication is a key element within organizational communication that aims to maintain a sustainable reputation (van Riel and Fombrun 2006).

As Brockner (1992) asserts, the downsizing process goes through three main phases, each of which has different objectives. In the first phase, the planning phase before the downsizing, it is important to develop a situation assessment, define a project management team that owns the downsizing project, supply information, develop detailed planning, and encourage the participation of important internal stakeholders in the downsizing process. In the second phase, the implementation phase during the downsizing, it is crucial make an efficient announcement to

provide explanations as well as assistance within the organization. In the third phase, the revitalization phase after the downsizing, it is important to meet the needs of the survivors as well as evaluate the entire process. Given these differences between the three phases, it is possible to envisage that numerous differences exist in the types of internal communication that should be shared.

Arising from this belief and from the presented importance of organizational communication during downsizing processes, the present paper aims to build a theoretical framework in which the type of internal communication better fits the development phase (before downsizing), the implementation phase (during downsizing), and the revitalization phase (after downsizing). Following the tradition of study in internal communication that specifies that there are four internal communications' dimensions—communication's content, flow, channels, and climate (van Riel and Fombrun 2006)—the present research proposes the following research question: Which types of content, channel, flow, and climates are important during and after the downsizing process?

To answer to this question, the structure of the paper will proceed as follows. First, the four dimensions of internal communication—flow, channels, content, and climate—will be presented, drawing from authors in the organizational communication tradition. Then, examples of the type of content, flow, channels, and climate will be discussed based on a literature review of the downsizing process regarding the planning phase (before downsizing), implementation phase (during downsizing), and revitalization phase (after downsizing). For each one of these phases, the communication objectives will be explained.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: FLOW, CHANNELS, CONTENT, AND CLIMATE

Based on the works of in exploring internal communication van Greenbaum et al. (1988); Greener (2000) Riel and Fombrun (2006), Smith et al. (2001), van Riel (1995) it is important to investigate four dimensions: communication content, flow, climate, and channels.

Communication content: Communicating the “we” and the “me”

The content of internal communication should include information both on the organization and on the function of the individual in the organization (van Riel and Fombrun 2006). These two aspects of the content are crucial because they are important elements that enable an increased organizational identification with the organization (Smith et al. 2001). Organizational communication shares a message that informs employees on the “we” level, thereby enhancing

employees' social categorization (Smith et al. 2001). Examples of messages on the "we" level include information on organizational goals, mission, and vision as well as other communication that tells employees who the organization for which they work is, what the organization is doing, and where it is going (van Riel and Fombrun 2006), such as information about new market entrances, alliances, financial investments, and future strategy and positioning. In addition, communication at the individual level shares information about "me" and enhances employees' self-categorization (Smith et al. 2001). Examples of messages at the "me" level include job tasks, performance feedback, job opportunities in the organization, and all other messages that tell employees about their roles/functions in the organization and how they perform these roles/performances.

Channels and flow of internal communication

The channels thorough which messages are transported represent the structure of internal communication (van Riel and Fombrun 2006). As van Riel (1995) and Chandler (1962) emphasize, the structure of internal communication follows both the structure of the strategy and the organizational culture. Indeed, "when a company has chosen for a business unit structure it would make sense to adapt the structure of the organization of the communication to match this. Concretely, in such a case, it means that the business units should receive their own authorities in the area of communication or the situation will be inadequate" (van Riel 1995, p. XX). Some channels are formal—i.e., line communication and parallel communication; others are instead informal—i.e., interpersonal management communication and grapevine (van Riel 1995, van Riel and Fombrun 2006). Informal channels are usually conducted face to face, whereas formal ones are conducted in writing. Certainly line communication can also be performed informally through cascade (Greener 2000). These channels relate to the communication flow, or the direction of the communication. Channels such as the line are related to a downward or upward flow (Greenbaum et al. 1988, van Riel 1995). Channels such as parallel communication are related to lateral communication.

Communication climate

The communication climate represents attitudes and feelings about how information is communicated (van Riel and Fombrun 2006, Smith et al. 2001). As with the content, the communication climate is very important to consider when thinking about internal communication because it influences organizational member's identification with the organization for which they work. Communication climate can be open (information being disseminated in the organization is trustworthy and open), participative (employees have the

feeling of having a voice in the organization), and supportive (employees have the feeling of being taken seriously).

Each of these elements might have a different weight during the different phases of the downsizing process. Which types of content, channel, flow, and climates are important during and after the downsizing? In investigating this further, a review of the literature on downsizing as well as studies that consider communication to be a relevant element is in order. The presented four dimensions of internal communication and their components will be the lens through which the present paper develops the literature review of downsizing studies.

Table 1. Four dimensions of internal communication

Contents	“Me”	Messages on the function of the individual in the organization (e.g., job tasks, performance feedback, job opportunities in the organization)
	“We”	Messages on the organization (e.g., information on organizational goals, mission, vision, strategic direction)
Channels (structure)	Interpersonal management com.	Informal channel, face to face
	Line	Formal channel, written
	Parallel	Formal channel, written
	Grapevine	Informal, channel face to face
Flows	Downward	From top down (usually line communication)
	Upward	From bottom up (usually line communication)
	Lateral	Between lines (usually parallel communication)
Climate	Participation	Feeling that information being disseminated in the organization is trustworthy and open
	Openness	Feeling of having a voice in the organization
	Supportiveness	Feeling of being taken seriously

Source: Table drawn considering work from van Riel and Fombrun (2006), van Riel (1995), Smith et al. (2001), and Greenbaum et al. (1988)

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN THE PLANNING PHASE

In the first phase before downsizing, all content of the communication has to be defined and planned in advance of the implementation phase. Messages and channels are limited to the downsizing team to ensure the confidentiality of the downsizing project.

Communication content before the downsizing

As Table 2 shows, in the phase before downsizing, messages should include information on both the “we” and the “me” levels. These two types of messages have to be developed by the

downsizing team and diffused among it and should be the base for the communication content in the implementation phase. The planning should ensure message continuity.

Table 2: Types of content in the planning phase (before downsizing)

		Content	Communication objectives	Authors
Content	“me”	Defining and communicating roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the project management team Defining the role of communication coordinator and responsibilities for defining the communication process in order to clearly assign responsibility to project team members Deciding on what treatment will be given to those who are laid off	To define ownership of the downsizing process. To avoid conflicts between different units, especially in matrix structures. To enforce trust toward top project management and downsizing process in the second phase.*	Cameron 1994, Marshall and Yorks 1994 Mishra 1999 Baron and Kreps 1999
	“we”	Defining and communicating credible and clear goals of downsizing to downsizing team Defining and communicating alternatives to downsizing that will not be implemented by the downsizing team Defining and communicating downsizing team’s terms, such as streamlining, reallocating, rightsizing, reengineering, or reorganizing (substitutes for downsizing) Developing and communicating vision and mission to downsizing team in order to clarify how downsizing will create a competitive advantage Taking into consideration the coherence of vision and mission in the overall strategy of the company	To create a rationale for communicating downsizing.* To create a rationale for communicating downsizing.* To avoid negative connotations in the project management team.* To create trust in management and visualize the future of the organization after the downsizing.* To avoid contradictions between downsizing strategy and corporate strategy.*	Cameron 1994, Appelbaum et al. 1999a Baron and Kreps 1999 Luthans and Sommer 1999 Baron and Kreps 1999, Appelbaum et al. 1999a, Bruton et al. 1996, Cameron et al. 1991, Mishra et al. 1998, Fischer 1988 cited in NCS Pearson web site 2002 Cascio 1993, Cameron et al. 1991

*Content planned and communicated in this phase within the team responsible for the downsizing process has to be communicated during the implementation phase as well. Continuity of the message is vital.

In the phase before the downsizing, assessing all relevant factors to organizational performance should enable management to give a credible reason for the eventual downsizing decision, as Orpen (1997) argues. From a communicational perspective, the objective is to create the rationale for communicating the downsizing. Such a decision must be accompanied by communication content that is credible and provides clear goals. Already in this first phase, the company should adopt a systematic approach and make a credible diagnosis of its situation (Cameron 1994, Appelbaum et al., 1999a). Such an in-depth analysis and the subsequent communication in the second phase will also increase trust and credibility in management. Consequently, the communication on the “we” level has to be conducted in this phase among people involved in the downsizing design; in addition, it should also be planned for the second phase (i.e., for the implementation of the downsizing).

Apart from providing clear and credible goals, it is important to develop a vision and strategy. Mishra et al. (1998) argue that management should never see downsizing as a short-term fix. Downsizing should be conceived in a strategic and long-term framework (including work redesign and restructuring), according to a large majority of authors (see Mishra et al. 1998; Baron and Kreps 1999; Appelbaum et al. 1999a). Management must integrate the decision to downsize into a well-crafted, credible vision (Baron and Kreps 1999, Appelbaum et al. 1999a, Bruton et al. 1996) that clarifies how downsizing will create a competitive advantage. According to Cameron et al. (1991), it seems that most firms that effectively downsized had clearly articulated visions of where they wanted the organization to go. In communicational terms, this piece of information, which indirectly emphasizes the future of the company, will help people understand the process as well as highlight the reflection behind the process. Moreover, Mishra et al. (1998) argue that a vision will help reinforce trust in senior managers as competent leaders who can revitalize the firm and restore its competitive advantage. In addition, a vision will help employees to feel in control of the situation since they can see a real future for the company (Mishra et al. 1998). It is important that the company build a specific downsizing strategy that is related to the overall corporate strategy whose objective is the realization of the vision. Likewise, this strategy should be translated into clear and credible goals, schedules, and milestones that are announced as soon as possible and faithfully adhered to. Otherwise, the lack of respect for engagements will have negative effects on employees' trust.

As will be evident during the discussion of the communication flow, in communicational terms the tasks outlined above require intensive interactions at the management level since it is essential to ensure a general agreement on and commitment to the project to be launched. Quirke (2000) concludes that, for this purpose, rich media, such as face-to-face meetings, are very important. Once a shared context has been established, however, less rich media, such as written progress reports, are used for efficient project communication and effective collaboration. In addition, according to Brockner (1992), layoffs should be a consequence of the strategy. Following this procedure will make downsizing a thoughtful and credible objective. Again, vision and strategy will primarily serve the informational dimension of communication. All of these elements of the vision and mission underscore the idea that it is particularly relevant to define and communicate the vision and the mission to create commitment among actors involved in the design of the downsizing process, but it is equally relevant in the second phase (i.e., the implementation phase). The continuity of this message at the "we" level has to be maintained.

As discussed earlier, the effect of the vision and mission presented above is far reaching as it can motivate participation from people who then feel more in control of the situation. This step will constitute the background of the process and, therefore, will also serve as a basis for communication and future interactions. Apart from clear and credible goals and a shared mission, it is important that organizations communicate that they have taken into consideration alternatives to downsizing. As Baron and Kreps (1999) state, because of the enormous costs imposed by layoffs, it should be clear to employees that alternatives have been considered. Appelbaum and Magda (2000) agree with this point of view. According to Appelbaum et al. (1999a), human resources should be considered as assets rather than liabilities. Another interesting point by Appelbaum and Magda (2000) is that the company should actually think in terms of “rightsizing.” This will also constitute an important message for employees: Redesigning company jobs and positions is a signal of management’s interest in layoff survivors. If managers are concerned with shifting the organization to its right size rather than merely eliminating staff to get out of present difficulties, employees are more likely to accept the need for the reductions and respond positively to them (Cameron and Freeman 1993). This is the very first behavioral element to be underscored. All of these activities, these preoccupations, beyond their future informational role, are also strong non-verbal messages. Still referring to the rightsizing idea, Luthans and Sommer (1999) also talk about the common use of substitutes for the term downsizing, such as streamlining, reallocating, rightsizing, reengineering, or reorganizing. The idea is to eliminate negative connotations generally associated with the process.

In defining the downsizing project management team, it is important to define the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved (Mishra et al. 1998, Cameron 1994, Kotter 1996; Mishra et al. 1998). These authors suggest that well-trained, well-respected managers who know the business and its people must do the planning. Mishra et al. (1998) state that the team that implements the downsizing should represent all members’ interests so employees see that management is looking carefully at everyone’s needs and concerns. This choice actually communicates a strong message of concern for the employees. According to Mishra et al. (1998), this team’s primary task is to address the concerns and needs of actors involved in the restructuring design. DiFonzo and Bordia (1998) add that engaging in actions such as tailoring announcements to address concerns peculiar to each audience will enhance employees’ trust in the company. At this point in the process, behavioral (interactive) aspects of communication are about to become increasingly important. From an informational perspective, such a team should act as a communication coordinator and is responsible for defining the communication process

(addressing internal stakeholder needs). This responsibility should be clearly assigned to a project team member.

The communication efforts at the “me” level presented above will once again be important for the workforce in the implementation phase. With a good planning, management will demonstrate that its attention is focused on its future, which will serve as a sign of management’s concern for the present process (during its implementation) as well as a strong sign of management’s belief in the company’s future for the survivors (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1996). Indeed, as in the communication content at the “we” level, it is necessary to ensure a continuity of messages at the “me” level throughout the implementation phase. In addition, in the planning phase the company should already be trying to prevent key people from leaving (Brockner 1992, Orpen 1997, Marshall and Yorks 1994) in order to protect core competencies (Orpen 1997). The company should focus on identifying crucial people and soliciting their commitment to the new organization (Brockner 1992). Orpen (1997) states that managers must go out of their way to involve and encourage those employees whom they least want to lose during the process of restructuring. As discussed earlier, information seems to play an important role for retention. Furthermore, assigning specific leadership positions to the most valued employees, asking them to participate in the planning (management teams) (Mishra et al. 1998), and training them are examples of measures that carry clear but indirect messages of concern and support from management. In addition to choosing the right people and communicating about roles and responsibilities, at the “me” level it is necessary to address training needs since they appear as a main issue during corporate restructuring. Companies that are tempted to cut short the training of managers and employees during the re-staffing process are making a mistake (Marshall and Yorks 1994). In fact, the literature suggests incorporating various types of training, such as stress management, communication training, and/or technical training (see Marshall and Yorks 1994, Orpen, 1997).

Communication channels and flows before the downsizing

As Table 3 summarizes, the channels in this phase are predominantly interpersonal communication between managers. Intensive interaction on a management level, face-to-face meetings between managers, and leaders’ visibility are important elements for creating trust and encouraging participation in the management team planning the downsizing project. The grapevine channel has to be avoided in order to limit rumors and ensure confidentiality. With regard to flow, the literature suggests that in the phase before the downsizing the flow is mainly upward and lateral, but only between actors directly involved in the team planning of the

downsizing process (Mishra et al. 1998). These flows are important respectively to create a participative communication climate and to coordinate efforts among team members.

Table 3: Communication channels and flows before the downsizing

		Which channels and flows	Communication objectives	Authors
Channel	Interpersonal management	Intensive interactions at the management level Leaders must be more visible and accessible than usual The project management team should communicate in face-to-face settings and perhaps off-site	To ensure a general agreement and commitment to the downsizing project team. To build strong relationships among the different actors of the downsizing management team. To maintain confidentiality from the outset and talk only when future strategy can be communicated to avoid rumours.	Golembiewski 1999 Cameron 1994, Marshall and Yorks 1994 Mishra et al. 1998 DiFonzo and Bordia 1998
	Line	Not discussed in the literature		
	Parallel	Face-to-face meetings are very important between different units involved in the downsizing	To reduce uncertainty and prevent later misunderstandings.	Quirke 2000
	Grapevine	Not discussed in the literature		
Flow	Downward	Not discussed in the literature		
	Upward	Only within the management team of the downsizing process Along a broader audience only when leadership wants to achieve an innovative downsizing process (the level of participation and involvement of employees depends on (1) the underlying assumptions of the leadership of the organization; (2) the level of trust that is already present in the organization; and (3) the department level of conflict—not strong common culture)	To engage the participation of important actors within the design phase of downsizing. To engage the participation of important actors within the design phase of downsizing.	Cameron 1994, Marshall and Yorks 1994 Norton and Fox 1997, Daniels et al. 1997, Clampitt 2001
	Lateral	Enforce horizontal communication only within the management team	To foster coordination of and agreement on the objectives and vision and to guarantee a univocal understanding of the downsizing process.	Daniels et al. 1997, Hatch 1997, Pace cited in Romano and Felicioli 1992

During this planning phase, the company should pay attention to particular elements. Top management support and commitment will be essential throughout the process; leaders must be more visible and accessible than usual (Cameron 1994, Marshall and Yorks 1994) and remain interactive with their employees (Cameron et al. 1991). In fact, the initial momentum to change should start from the top. Cameron et al. (1991) state that effective downsizing requires hands-on involvement and momentum that originates at the top of the organization. Such behavior translates the importance given to the process by the company. However, this presence is likely to be linked to the strategy followed by the company; during a convergence period, when downsizing drives redesign, it is more likely that this closeness and the role of top executives will be reduced (Mishra 1999). In communicational terms, building a team and emphasizing

management visibility and accessibility are mainly aimed at building strong relationships with the different actors of the process. Face-to-face meetings are also crucial (Quirke 2000).

Communication flows are also likely to have an important role since coordination seems to be the major benefit of horizontal communication flows (Daniels et al. 1997, Hatch 1997, Pace cited in Romano and Felicioli 1992). Coordination and agreement on the objectives and the vision are actually important at this stage in order to make communication clear and credible. Pace (cited by Romano and Felicioli 1992) interestingly adds that horizontal communication results in a guarantee of a univocal understanding of change in conciliating, negotiating, and composing the differences to finally develop interpersonal support (cohesion, ties). Therefore, effective horizontal communication flows are likely to enhance the effectiveness of the downsizing process strategic set-up by creating a shared understanding of the project vision and strategy among the project team. When there is a matrixed structure, the project team is generally organized around many projects, implying that teamwork is generally a common practice. Therefore, this step likely be facilitated. However, as Norton and Fox (1997) suggest, this type of structure tends to create and add confusion about roles and responsibilities within the company, yet clarity is vital in the downsizing process to ensure the appropriate development and maintain control of the situation. Hatch (1997) makes an important point when she states that the greatest difficulty in using the matrix structure lies in managing the conflict built into the dual lines of authority to which matrixed employees are subjected. This often leads to breakdowns in communication, confusion, divided loyalties, and frustration (Norton and Fox 1997). This divided authority is likely to repeat such problems during a downsizing situation.

Another central issue influenced by communication flow in the development and planning phase is confidentiality. Confidentiality should be maintained until the official announcement (Mishra et al. 1998). A high tension exists regarding the decision to talk or not talk about the coming change. Before the definitive organization and its resource allocation are announced, rumors could circulate and confidentiality could be violated. To prevent such problems, Mishra et al. (1998) recommend taking two measures: the project management team should communicate in a face-to-face setting and the meeting should perhaps occur off-site.

In maintaining confidentiality, it is vital to create a culture of trust, which is affected by upward communication. According to Daniels et al. (1997), upward communication is a prerequisite for involvement of actors in the downsizing project team in decision making, problem solving, and the development of policies and procedures. Pace (cited in Romano and Felicioli 1992) makes a

list of the different functions of upward communication, which include expressing working problems, offering suggestions and ideas to ameliorate the department or organization members, expressing opinions, and reflecting on employees' work in addition to reporting (work status, results, etc.). These functions are all clearly essential in a participative and interactive process. Furthermore, Daniels et al. (1997) emphasize that, among the factors that affect accuracy of upward communication, trust is the most important. If trust is low, the communication flow could be reduced. Therefore, applying this theory to restructuring situations, upward flows are likely to suffer from the frequent loss of trust that often accompanies uncertain situations. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, coordination seems to be the most important benefit of horizontal communication (Daniels et al. 1997, Hatch 1997, Pace cited in Romano and Felicioli, 1992). Daniels et al. (1997) emphasize other benefits, such as inducing flexibility in organizational structure, facilitating problem solving and information sharing across different work groups as well as task coordination between departments and project teams, and enhancing morale and affording means for resolving conflicts. These elements are likely to be highly relevant in the participative process for actors within the downsizing management team. Consequently, since sharing a common vision of the future, accessing equal information levels, dealing with problems and conflicts as well as agreeing on decisions are essential components in the restructuring process, effective horizontal and upward communication flows should foster participation during the downsizing project team meetings.

While the flow and channels of communication should be implemented in the phase before downsizing occurs, the literature also suggests that it is relevant to plan during this initial phase the downward communication that will take place in the second phase. Planning downward communication for the second phase is relevant since, as Stohl (1995) emphasizes, the hierarchical communication enables the dominance of a particular interpretative frame, the inculcation of specific organizational premises or bases for action, and the assignment of meanings to events. Furthermore, the role of information adequacy should and tends to be more about fostering members' involvement and identification with the organization rather than trying to produce compliance and authority (Daniels and al. 1997). These elements correspond to the present objectives of information since decisions are made at the top. This communication flow is responsible for giving the rationale, the vision of future, and the objectives of the process. In other words, a well-implemented downward communication system is likely to facilitate such information processes and lay the groundwork for involvement and commitment.

In addressing communication flows, particular attention should be paid to the grapevine. Hellweg (cited in Daniels et al. 1997) states that grapevine communication plays an important role in rumor transmission. Likewise, Lewis (1999) studied the use of specific channels to communicate change and found that word-of-mouth is actually the third channel of communication during change. Rumors are distorted through sharpening, levelling, and assimilation; the grapevine is a powerful tool of communication that does not follow any rule (Hellweg cited in Daniels et al. 1997). Because the process should be well understood by the workforce (Cameron et al. 1991) and because there is no swifter way to generate rumors and anxiety than to remain secretive about what is happening in the organization (Booth and Smith 1995), the company needs to continue to communicate consistently. To avoid rumors, a communication plan must be developed (Golembiewski 1999, Booth and Smith 1995, DiFonzo and Bordia 1998, Marshall and Yorks 1994, Mishra et al. 1998). Appelbaum et al. (1999b) underline the importance of the communication plan; its goal is to inform employees, suppliers, customers, and investors during the implementation phase about the progress of the downsizing activities. Furthermore, continually updating employees on the progress of the restructuring and the long-term vision enables the company to retain valued employees (Mishra et al. 1998), which is a major concern in downsizing processes since valued people tend to leave the company during turbulent periods. Moreover, DiFonzo and Bordia (1998) state that people need a source they can trust who will give them the information they need to know. Therefore, planning a hot-line (Booth and Smith 1995) for the implementation phase, an information bureau, or any reliable source of information could help manage employees' concerns and questions about the restructuring process. This service should also dispel rumors and misinformation. Such a service is a tangible signal of care for and concern with regard to employees.

Communication climate in the phase before the downsizing

The communication climate is an extremely relevant factor that enables the organization to make people feel more in control of the situation. As indicated by several authors, participation should be limited to the team that redesigns the organization. In some cases, it can be extended among all members, but these cases are rare, not the norm.

Table 4: Type of communication climate before the downsizing

		Which type of climate	Communication objective	Authors
Climate	Participation	Actively engaging actors is important for the management team in the redesign	To make people feel more in control of the situation. This step also serves as a basis for communication and future interaction exchanges (especially in matrix structures).	Marshall and Yorks 1994
		Fostering participation among all employees only in particular cases		See point 2 in upward communication

	Openness	Not discussed in the literature		
	Supportiveness	Not discussed in the literature		

Clearly, participation acts as an important communication vector. Bodega (1997) actually says that, when people are involved in downsizing decisions, the results are superior in terms of personal commitment as well as economical efficiency. Cameron (1994) sums up this idea by stating that everyone is accountable for downsizing goals. However, despite these recommendations, it seems that greater participation (horizontally and vertically) is more likely to occur when redesign drives downsizing, not the opposite (Freeman 1999). In introducing participation, the organization steps further into the communication process and toward its objectives: involvement and commitment. Still, according to Quirke (2000), creating support involves a significant shift in interaction; therefore, it is also important to highlight that honest communication will be required in order to encourage the entire firm to participate (de Meuse et al. 1994). The aim is to elicit acceptance of the need for the change. When survivors are allowed to participate in the downsizing design process, they assume partial ownership in the process and are more likely to accept and even be supportive of it (Noer 1993, Willinshganz 1997 cited in Appelbaum and Magda 2000). Involvement aims as much to encourage employees to share their pre-existing reactions, concerns, and objections as to inform them about management thinking. This clearly requires the existence of direct dialogue, for which the focus must be put on listening. Consequently, both upward and downward flows become essential, and the dimensions identified by Gibbs will impact participative initiatives. In light of these discussions, clearly it is important to create a participative communication climate among actors involved in the downsizing process from the beginning.

However, although a large majority of authors argue in favor of employee participation in the planning phase, larger participation requires particular downsizing redesign processes, such as innovative redesign projects. As Marshall and Yorks (1994) affirm, redesign should be approached as a group process. Cascio (1993) agrees with this common idea, stating that companies should plan downsizing with employees instead of springing it on them unannounced. Marshall and Yorks (1994) also argue for participative planning when they state that, while senior management can develop the organizational framework, the actual structure is usually best developed from the bottom up. The company should inform employees about its overall strategy and actively engage them in the redesign. Cameron et al. (1991) as well as Bodega (1997) add that the most successful downsizing processes have been implemented by command from the top down but initiated from the bottom up. Appelbaum et al. (1999a) argue that the company should

involve employees in identifying what needs to change through downsizing. Many restructuring efforts fail to involve employees in any decisions either about the process or the desired outcomes (Cascio 2001). As a result, employees feel powerless and helpless, resulting in a massive uncertainty in the organization. In other words, as stated by Cameron et al. (1991), downsizing from the top down provides consistency, vision, and clear direction as well as visible commitment and hands-on involvement. Downsizing from the bottom up helps foster innovation and improvements that would not have been possible had top management simply mandated headcount reductions. In fact, by involving employees, companies can benefit from creative solutions for cost reductions and job redesign.

According to Norton and Fox (1997), a broader participation of employees in the redesign process plays down certain conditions. They assert that every organization incorporates assumptions about the correct way for individuals to relate with one another. The degree of employee participation considered appropriate is one of the underlying assumptions that drives much, if not most, of the behaviors in organizations today (Norton and Fox 1997). In other words, the underlying management style will determine the participation level. They add that, in general, organizations have more or less participation depending on how progressive and decentralized they are. Within this framework, Norton and Fox (1997) introduce two major management orientations: management and leadership orientation. In a downsizing situation, the leadership model seems more likely to sustain an interactive process and communication since it is based on various features, including the importance of the group, empowerment, involvement, new ideas, and proactivity, which are all highly relevant elements in an interactive process (Norton and Fox 1997).

Summarizing the types of internal communication to be used in the planning phase before downsizing

In synthesis, it is evident that all four dimensions are important within this planning phase. Current literature about downsizing suggests that internal communication has to be defined both by what has to be communicated before downsizing and what has to be communicated during the phase of implementation. In other words, in this planning phase the management team responsible for the downsizing process should communicate messages that will endure throughout the implementation phase. The “me” level is relevant for helping the members of the downsizing team perform their temporary task; it is also relevant for planning communication for the implementation phase that informs survivors about how the downsizing will affect them and how job positions will be redesigned. Meanwhile, the “we” level is relevant because it allows the

organization to define credible and clear goals for downsizing as well as develop a mission and vision and the language of the downsizing project. These elements will create rationales for communicating downsizing among the members of the downsizing team in the first phase (before) and among the general employees in the implementation phase (during).

With regard to flow, the literature underscores the facts that, in the phase before the downsizing, the flow is mainly upward and lateral but only between actors directly involved in the team planning of the downsizing process. This flow creates a participative communication climate and coordinates efforts among the team members. Meanwhile, the channels in this phase are mainly the interpersonal communications between managers. Intensive interaction at the management level, face-to-face meetings, and leaders' visibility are important elements for creating trust and participation in the management team planning the downsizing project. The grapevine channel has to be avoided in order to limit rumors and ensure confidentiality. Finally, the communication climate enables the organization to make people feel more in control of the situation. As emphasized by some authors, participation has to be limited to the team that redesigns the organization. In some cases it can be extended to all members, but these cases are rare, not the norm.

COMMUNICATING IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE (DURING DOWNSIZING)

In the second phase, all the content that has been planned at the "me" and "we" levels has to be implemented. Although this was discussed in the previous section on the planning phase, this section will provide additional details and evidence to support this.

Communication content during downsizing

As Table 5 shows, the messages that were planned during the phase before the downsizing are communicated during the implementation phase. In particular, the messages regarding employees' roles become quite important.

Table 5: Communication content during downsizing

		Type of content	Communication objective	Authors
Content	Me	Information on future training	To provide indirect messages to the workforce from management to shows attention to the company's future and signal concern for the present process.	Kets de Vries and Balazs 1996.
		Communication on how the downsizing will affect survivors	To be prepared for the announcement by fostering trust and support from the employees.	Tang and Fuller 1995, Willihnganz 1997 cited in Appelbaum and Magda 2000, Kets de Vries and Balazs 1996
		Communication on re-designing jobs and positions	To signal managements' concern for layoff survivors.	Appelbaum and Magda 2000

	We	*see content at the “we” level that was planned in phase 1 (Table 1). Development and communication of the vision and mission	To clarify how downsizing will create a competitive advantage, to create trust in management, and to visualize the organization’s future after the downsizing.	*see references in Table 1. These elements have all been planned in previous phase.
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At the level of “me,” information must focus on various elements, such as the separation process, or benefits and services that will be provided (Mishra et al. 1998, Cameron et al. 1991, Brockner 1992, DiFonzo and Bordia 1998). According to Booth and Smith (1995), all employees should receive an information package that not only details the plan but also provides information about the assistance available to them during the transition process. Here again, information will surely contribute to clarifying the situation about roles and responsibilities. Moreover, as discussed earlier in the section about planning this message, management should communicate with survivors regarding adapted solutions such as job enrichment or should solicit input from employees so that survivors recognize the new opportunities (Brockner 1992). Such elements act as powerful messages that emphasize the future possibilities and contribute to helping survivors cope with change and the new situation.

This communication at the level of the “me” is important because the outcome of the downsizing process is very much influenced by how victims are treated (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1996). Therefore, according to Brockner (1992), the company should implement both intangible and tangible planned assistance measures, which are normally developed during the planning phase. Appelbaum et al. (1999a) state that the company should provide equal attention and support through tangible and intangible measures both to those who stay in the organization and those who leave it. Support measures for the victims are doubtlessly a powerful communication tool. In fact, the manner in which victims are treated will have a significant influence on those who stay. In other words, providing those who are laid off with severance packages, assistance in finding another job, and information packages is not only important at an ethical level, but also likely to have a positive impact on the survivors, who can weigh the importance of the human factor within the company. Moreover, since a high risk exists for the company to experience an exodus of its best employees during such a turbulent situation, survivors need to be given a reason to stay.

As Cascio (1993) argues, companies must communicate and share the details of their plans with employees. At the level of “we,” explaining what is happening, why it is happening, and who is involved will help employees maintain their sense of equity and foster an acceptance that allows them to move on with their lives and work (Booth and Smith 1995). Communicated information should incorporate the vision and mission and clarify objectives of the downsizing in order to

foster trust and avoid grapevine rumors. Indeed, as many authors suggest, by communicating the vision and mission, management reduces employees' worries and re-directs energies to the job at hand (Fischer 1988 cited in NCS Pearson web site 2002). As Cascio (2001) states, companies must do everything to ensure employees' commitment and their trust in such situations—a recommendation that was also part of the downsizing planning phase. From a communicational perspective, the message must be clear: Stay! The company has a future, and the human factor is valued. Indeed, management should show that it uses layoffs as a last resort only after considering all possible alternatives.

Communication flows and channels during downsizing

As Table 6 shows, the main task of internal communication is to inform employees, in a broad manner, what is going on with the downsizing process. Everybody should have access to the same information in the same manner.

Table 6: Channels and flows during downsizing

		Channels and flows	Communication objective	Authors
Channel	Interpersonal management	Leaders must be more visible and accessible than usual for all employees	To build strong relationships with the different actors of the downsizing management team.	Appelbaum et al. 1999a
	Line	Important in this phase due to the aggressive downward communication; line leaders must be more visible and accessible than usual for all employees.	To foster trust.	Appelbaum et al. 1999a, Marshall and Yorks 1994, Brockner 1992, Young and Post 1993, Booth and Smith 1995
	Parallel	Not discussed in the literature		
	Grapevine	Must be monitored and avoided with an aggressive downward communication	To ensure confidentiality	Marshall and Yorks 1994, DiFonzo and Bordia 1998
Flow	Downward	Prevails once the mission and vision are established Over-communicate	1) To ensure confidentiality and be able to provide the rationale, vision of the future, and objectives of the process. 2) To avoid the grapevine and persuade people that the change is positive, focusing only on creating awareness rather than translating awareness into action. 3) To prevent key people from leaving. To avoid rumors.	Quirke 2000, Stohl 1995, Booth and Smith 1995, Marshall and Yorks 1994 Brockner 1992, Mishra et al. 1998, Cameron et al. 1991, Marshall and Yorks 1994
	Upward	Not discussed in the literature		
	Lateral	Not discussed in the literature		

The planning done in the phase before downsizing for downward communication has to be implemented carefully at this point. Marshall and Yorks (1994) state that management should provide repetitive messages and ongoing communication. For this purpose, management should monitor and listen to employees throughout the process. Appelbaum et al. (1999a) speak about an ongoing analysis and feedback that should be performed by management. Monitoring employees also means recognizing the importance of the grapevine communication (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998), whose rumors are symptoms of uncertainty, which result in many negative

effects. Moreover, one of the most important factors of the downsizing process is top management's involvement and commitment (Cameron 1994, Kets de Vrie and Balazs 1996, Brockner 1992, Booth and Smith 1995, Appelbaum et al. 1987). Leaders should be visible, accessible, and interacting freely with those affected by the downsizing (Appelbaum et al. 1999a). In fact, management visibility provides highly effective communication by providing a highly symbolic message. In other words, more than the content of the communication, the status of managers conveys the importance of the event and consideration for the employees. However, this involvement is likely to be moderated by the importance of the downsizing process and the strategy followed.

Managers tend to diminish their communication during downsizing periods, often due to a reluctance to share disturbing information (Kets de Vrie and Balazs 1996). This is precisely the lack of information that is likely to cause the greatest damage in morale and productivity. In fact, those who determined to proceed with the downsizing must announce it and take the responsibility of such a decision (Booth and Smith 1995); no external voice, such as consultants, should be used for such an announcement. Burke and Nelson (1997) argue that communication should be direct (face-to-face) and that management should also allow the employees to vent their anger and frustration. Face-to-face communication with leaders at the line level seems to be the most effective channel for communicating change as well (Marshall and Yorks 1994, Brockner 1992, Young and Post 1993).

For this occasion and during the whole process, top management must show concern for employees; it must be prepared to answer their questions (Appelbaum et al. 1999b), should listen to them, show it shares the "burden," and express commitment (Mishra et al. 1998). To borrow Brockner's expression (1992), top management should remain interactive with its employees and increase its availability. According to Booth and Smith (1995), management and human resource personnel must increase their availability to employees in order to provide guidance and dispel rumors. Fostering communication between management and employees is one of the most effective ways to promote trust and loyalty toward the organization as well as create a positive impact on job satisfaction (Tang and Fuller 1995 cited in Appelbaum and Magda 2000). Such behavior sends an important indirect message to employees and will contribute to the feeling of respect for employees throughout this difficult process. In communication terms, this means that face-to-face communication is vital and should be fostered through line and management interpersonal communication. Indeed, management must act and implement the plans developed in the previous phases in tandem. During the whole downsizing process, management must tell

the truth and over-communicate (Brockner 1992, Mishra et al. 1998, Cameron et al. 1991, Marshall and Yorks 1994). During this stage, the workforce tends to be hungry for information.

Communication climate during downsizing

As Table 7 shows, in this phase which is critical from the point of view of transparency, the organization should create an open communication climate that is synchronized with the availability of leaders (see channels).

Table 7: Type of communication climate during downsizing

		Climate	Communication objective	Authors
Climate	Participation	Not discussed in the literature		
	Openness	Openness and honesty about the reason for downsizing and the implementation process are essential	To foster trust and avoid rumors.	Baron and Kreps 1999, Appelbaum et al. 1987
	Supportiveness	Not discussed in the literature		

During this implementation phase, as Booth and Smith (1995) indicate, the leadership of the firm needs to immediately communicate the specifics of the restructuring program to employees, perhaps even over-communicating it. Such communication lessens confusion. This communication event is vital because enacting change without saying anything beforehand would violate employees' trust (DiFonzo and Bordia 1998). The communication climate, therefore, has to be open. Indeed, the downsizing announcement entails an important symbolic value; explaining the situation openly and with ample advanced notice (Mishra et al. 1998, DiFonzo and Bordia 1998, Brockner 1992, Appelbaum and Magda 2000) will help employees understand the difficulties ahead and will allow them to feel a sense of trust in the organization's efforts. Openness and honesty about the reason for downsizing and the implementation process are therefore essential.

In fact, justification and credible reasons (Baron and Kreps 1999) as well as the criteria for layoffs (Burke and Nelson 1997) appear to be of the utmost importance for employees during this phase. Hosting open discussions and enhancing the possibility for employees to express their feelings, as well as providing access to human resource (Appelbaum et al. 1987) and/or psychological support (Booth and Smith 1995), can also help reduce anxiety of those being laid off (DiFonzo and Bordia 1998). This open dialogue possibility should also be offered to survivors. Cascio (2001) states that employees' morale is often the first casualty of downsizing. In fact, many firms seem to underestimate the emotional damage that survivors suffer by watching others lose their jobs (Cascio 1993). Indeed, management should respect the mourning phase survivors are going through (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1996)

Summarizing the types of internal communication that should be conducted during downsizing

During the implementation phase, planned content at the level of “we” and “me” is communicated through an intensive downward communications flow, line communication becomes vital as well as both written and interpersonal management communication. As many authors underline, these two types of line communication are work together to create a context of trust that avoids the grapevine (see Brockner 1992, Mishra et al. 1998, Cameron et al. 1991, Marshall and Yorks 1994). In this phase, the communication climate has to be open since it is particularly important to show that management is open to answering any kind of question.

COMMUNICATING TO SURVIVORS IN THE REVITALIZATION PHASE

Within this phase, many aspects of internal communication are important. All communication efforts are aimed at making the employees feel secure and to providing potential job perspectives and clarity regarding the future direction of the organization. For these reasons, many flows and channels—both formal and informal—should be initiated to give the employees the feeling of being supported.

Communication content after downsizing

In this phase, survivor sickness syndrome (Appelbaum and Magda 2000) manifests, presenting the following characteristics: low morale, fear, resistance to change, and cynicism that creates paralysis. Therefore, the objective of this phase becomes to maintain trust and empowerment, which are often shattered during the process of downsizing (Mishra et al. 1998). The communication content at the “me” level during the second phase that focused on survivors (training, future job expectations, etc.) has to be increased. Survivors’ sense of empowerment may not suffer and their sense of meaning should not be lost due to insufficient communication (Appelbaum et al. 1999a).

At the “we” level, it is important to communicate with survivors in order to address their very first need following a layoff—their need to know the extent to which they should worry about the possibility of future organizational layoffs (Appelbaum and Magda 2000). Brockner (1992) argues that when survivors believe that more layoffs are on the way, feelings of insecurity rise. To avoid that at this stage, management needs to orient survivors and other stakeholders toward the general future of the organization (Appelbaum et al., 1987). The link between downsizing according to a long-term plan and related goals allows those remaining to see their future within

the organization (Appelbaum and Magda 2000). Yet reciprocal commitment (between the company and employees) tends to be lacking, according to Appelbaum and Magda (2000). To address this, Appelbaum et al. (1999d) suggest that the leader be responsible for understanding the present state of the organization, setting the direction of the future state, and leading the organization through the transition to the future state after the downsizing has occurred. Burke and Nelson (1997) state that management should continue to tell employees about the company's direction and its plans for growth as well as try to boost survivors' morale. As a result, the content communication at the "we" level remains vital for survivors.

Table 8: Communication content after the downsizing

		Type of content	Communication objective	Author
Content	Me	Communication about survivors' future treatment in the organization (training, future perspectives)	To mitigate survivor sickness syndrome and promote higher job satisfaction	Mishra et al. 1998, Appelbaum and Magda 2000
	We	Communication about the direction toward the future state	To decrease uncertainty about the future	Appelbaum et al. 1999d, Burke and Nelson 1997

Communication flow and channels after downsizing

As indicated earlier, managers should communicate among each other in order to avoid sending conflicting messages to their subordinates (Appelbaum et al. 1999d), but once again, such information (the above-mentioned measures) will not be sufficient. Communication is essential not only for adapting to change, but also for restoring motivation. Quirke (2000) states that gaining employees' commitment entails a high degree of talking through the pressures affecting the business and reviewing possible competitive scenarios and strategic options; he highlights the high level of interaction and participation this requires. In communication terms, this means that not only downward line interpersonal communication is vital in this phase, but also upward communication. In addition upward communication will help to identify rumors emerging as a consequence of survivor sickness syndrome (Appelbaum and Magda 2000).

Table 9: Communication channels and flow after the downsizing

		Type of communication channels and flows	Communication objective	Authors
Channel	Interpersonal management	Not discussed in the literature		
	Line	Line managers have to share information, informal meetings	To avoid sending conflicting messages to survivors and to discuss issues that arise.	Appelbaum et al. 1999d
	Parallel	Between line managers	To avoid sending conflicting messages through lines.	Appelbaum et al. 1999d
	Grapevine	Not discussed in the literature		
Flow	Downward	Continue downward communication	To communicate to survivors.	Appelbaum et al. 1999a
	Upward	Gather feedback from survivors	To make them feel supported.	Quirke 2000
	Lateral	Increase horizontal communication between line managers	To avoid conflicts along the line	Appelbaum et al. 1999d

Communication climate after downsizing

A very important element of the communication climate in this phase is the sense of being taken seriously. As Appelbaum et al. (1999d) assert, in order to restore commitment management should try to increase job satisfaction by supporting employees. Appelbaum and Magda (2000) also suggest that the creation and fostering of commitment and loyalty toward the organization can be achieved through supportive communication. Indeed, as discussed earlier, survivors should develop a sense of empowerment in this phase, but to do so requires not only communication content relevant to their future roles, but also the sense of being taken seriously. Indeed, management should respect the mourning phase survivors go through (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1996) and should assure them that they are going to develop new capabilities in their new job positions. Although not all literature directly discussed the need for a climate that shows that survivors are taken seriously, it incorporates many actions and communication actions that involve providing support for survivors; therefore, a communication climate that permits survivors to be taken seriously is relevant.

Table 10: Type of communication climate after the downsizing

		Type of communication climate	Communication objective	Author
Climate	Participation	Not discussed in the literature		
	Openness	No discussed in the literature		
	Supportiveness	Make survivors feel supported	To avoid survivor sickness syndrome and restore commitment.	Quirke 2000 Appelbaum et al. 1999d, Appelbaum and Magda 2000

Summarizing the types of communication that should be conducted after downsizing

In the phase after the downsizing is implemented, communication efforts have to be directed toward the survivors, who must be assured about their future role and potential growth in the company and about the future of the organization itself. Downward communication has to be continued, while parallel interpersonal communication between managers will help avoid any incoherent messages. In addition to the flows and channels, it is important that survivors feel they are being taken seriously (i.e., feeling supported). This communication climate can be enhanced with an upward communication that line managers can facilitate.

CONCLUSIONS

Internal communication flow, channels, content, and climate are all important aspects of each phase of the downsizing process. Comparing the three phases—planning, implements, and revitalizing—certainly the literature review shows that these dimensions are all important either before, during, or after the downsizing process. The dimensions of the internal communication

that are always important based on the discussion of the theoretical background. For example, the content at the organizational level (the “we” level) and at the level of employees’ functions and roles (the “me” level) have to be consistently pushed in the organization, with a focus on continuity throughout the downsizing process. Moreover, the informal channels of interpersonal communication are very important throughout the process; during the planning phase, the downsizing team members should proactively participate in the design of the downsizing, while during the implementation phase leaders should be around and available to enforce an open climate and in the revitalization phase uncertainty among survivors should be avoided.

On the other hand, given the confidentiality required of the downsizing process, line communication becomes important only during the implementation phase and the grapevine should be avoided until the revitalization phase, when it becomes important to listen to survivors’ feelings. For the same reason, although the lateral and upward flows are important in the phase before and after the actual downsizing, in the planning phase they are limited to the downsizing team. With regard to the communication climate, the literature review indicates that participation is important among team members who design the downsizing process involving team members and planning the messages for the second phase makes the overall process more effective throughout all three phases. Finally, openness will trigger transparency during the downsizing process, while supportiveness will enhance survivors’ feelings; both of these aspects contribute to helping survivors commit to the future of the organization.

From a theoretical point of view, this analysis shows that, although the literature on downsizing does not refer directly to the internal communication tradition, it does discuss the four dimensions of internal communication. It would be interesting to further investigate the interrelationships between these two traditions of study to find other possible arguments that support the internal communication tradition.

From a managerial point of view, the focal point of this discussion is that the planning of effective internal communication during organizational downsizing should include communication objectives that are specific for each phase and for each internal communication dimension. This type of communication planning enables the organization to ensure the consistency of the message over time while permitting it to program channels and flows according to the necessity of each phase of the downsizing process. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to investigate the degree to which this planning framework really contributes to the success of the downsizing process. This element provides a base for future research.

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